DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 337 317 RC 018 207

AUTHOR Green, Jennie Spencer; Sancho, Anthony R.
TITLE Meeting the Challenge of Rural Dropout Students: Making a Difference through Parent-School Collaboration.
PUB DATE Mar 90
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Rural Education Symposium of the American Council on Rural Special Education and the National Rural and Small Schools Consortium (Tucson, AZ, March 18-22, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; High Risk Students; *Parent Influence; *Parent Participation; *Parent School Relationship; Parent Student Relationship; Parent Teacher Cooperation

ABSTRACT

In recent years, educators have recognized the importance of effective parent and community partnerships for improving school participation of at-risk students. A survey of six southwestern states showed that parent and educator attitudes toward parent involvement were positive, but that little teacher training in this area was occurring and that educators often frustrated enthusiastic parents by relegating them to traditional roles such as school supporter or audience. A series of Wisconsin studies confirmed that: (1) the family provides the primary educational environment; (2) parent involvement improves student achievement; (3) parent involvement is most effective when it is comprehensive, long-lasting, and well planned; (4) parent involvement is beneficial in high school, as well as in the lower grades; (5) low-income and minority students have the most to gain, but parents do not have to be well educated to be involved; and (6) the interconnections among home, school, and community are important. School programs aimed at increasing parent involvement require site-specific development and leadership and should be sensitive to student development stages, the changing nature of American families, and the particular needs of the local population. Parents can serve as valuable resources in the education of their children as teachers, as partners in educational decisionmaking, and as community representatives. Strategies for implementing parent-school partnerships could involve parent education, giving parents follow-up assistance, allowing parents to take the initiative, or allowing parents to make recommendations. (SV)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED337317

MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF RURAL DROPOUT STUDENTS: MAKING A DIFFERENCE THROUGH PARENT - SCHOOL COLLABORATION

paper presented at

National Rural and Small Schools Consortium (NRSSC)
Annual Symposium

Tucson, Arizona
March 18-23, 1990

Jennie Spencer Green, Ph.D.
Senior Program Associate

Anthony R. Sancho, Ph.D.
Senior Equity Specialist

Southwest Regional Laboratory (SWRL)
4665 Lampson Avenue
Los Alamitos, CA 90720

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN **OTHER THAN PAPER COPY** HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

NRSSC

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

EC 018207

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF RURAL DROPOUT STUDENTS: MAKING A DIFFERENCE THROUGH PARENT-SCHOOL COLLABORATION

Traditionally, most parents have delegated the responsibility for educating their children to teachers and the school. Because this approach has failed to produce the kinds of educational programs that meet the needs of many of today's students, a new awareness of parent-school collaboration has been emerging. In recent years, educators have recognized the importance of establishing effective parent and community partnerships, in order to improve school participation of at-risk students. The changing demographics, in both rural and urban areas, are causing new challenges that the schools must address. Low achievement, diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, non-traditional family configurations, and high mobility rates are only a few of the factors that are affecting the changing roles of schools in the education of at-risk youngsters.

Defining Parent/School Partnerships

Current research demonstrates that programs designed with strong parent involvement produce students who perform better than identical programs that do not seek out parent participation. Schools that relate well to their parents and communities out-perform those that do not. Children of parents who do help them at home and stay in touch with the school score higher than children of similar aptitude and family background whose parents are not involved. Schools where students are failing improve dramatically when parents are called in to help and participate (Henderson, 1987).

The research on the relationship between parent involvement and student outcomes in school results in long-term improvements. The literature is widely diverse and there is far more agreement than disagreement about the importance of including parents in the educational process. Nevertheless, educators and policymakers continue to disagree on actual implementation strategies.

In 1980, the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) began a six-year Parent Involvement Project. Approximately 3,000 parents and 4,000 educators from six states were involved in the study. The results focused on the critical issues of teacher training and parent involvement. The survey results were clear regarding parent involvement

training for teachers. Parents favored it; principals expected it; and teachers wanted it. The attitudes of parents and educators were positive, but very little teacher training in parent involvement is in fact occurring at the undergraduate level (Chavkin, William, 1988).

Further, the study showed that parents were eager to assume a variety of meaningful roles at school, from tutor to classroom assistant to decision-maker. Professional educators, however, tend to consider only the most traditional roles, such as "school program supporter" or audience at school functions, to be important. Such discrepancies leave parents feeling frustrated, belittled, and left out. Research on parent involvement tells us that there is no best way to go about it. Instead, what works is for parents to be involved in a variety of roles over a period of time. The actual focus of parent involvement does not seem to be as important as whether this involvement is well-planned, comprehensive, and long lasting (Gordon, 1978; Becher, 1984).

What Do We Know?

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction has been conducting a series of studies through its **Mobilizing Resources to Better Serve Children at Risk** Project. Based on this research, several important hypothesis have been confirmed. These are:

1. The family provides the primary educational environment, particularly in terms of social and language skills.

2. Involving parents in their children's formal education improves student achievement.

3. Parent involvement is most effective when it is comprehensive, long-lasting, and well-planned.

4. The benefits are not confined to early childhood or the elementary level; there are strong effects from involving parents continuously throughout high school.

5. Involving parents in their own children's education at home is not enough. To ensure the quality of schools as institutions serving the community, parents must be involved at all levels in the school.

6. Children from low-income and minority families have the most to gain when schools involve parents. Parents do not have to be well-educated to help.

7. We cannot look at the school and the home in isolation; we must understand how they interconnect with each other and with the community at large.

What Do We Still Need To Know?

Based on the above cited research, several gaps in our knowledge still exist.

1. What type and intensity of parent involvement is needed to raise the achievement level of low-income and minority children to that expected for middle class students?

2. What forms of parent involvement are most appropriate for students in middle, junior high, and high schools?

3. What resources do parents and educators need in order to work effectively as partners?

4. What are the most appropriate roles for government agencies at the federal, state and local levels in encouraging, supporting, and expanding parent involvement?

5. What contributions can be made by others in the community, such as local service agencies, employers, business and industry, to help families and schools work better together (Henderson, 1987).

Overcoming Barriers to Parent/School Collaboration

Joyce Epstein, a parent involvement researcher at Johns Hopkins University, raises a very important question. "What is more important to student development, success and learning - the school or the family?

The answers revealed through significant and comprehensive studies point to several important guiding principles (Epstein, 1988).

• *School and family connections must take a developmental course.* Efforts can be initiated at all grade levels to inform parents of learning objectives and school procedures. For example, a task force on secondary schools for the Maryland State Department of Education listed 10 activities that high schools should conduct, to keep parents informed and involved in their children's education, school programs, and school-related decisions. Schools should be responsive to those family and school issues that become more important in the upper grades - dropout prevention, substance abuse, family planning and pregnancy prevention, and mastery of the basic skills and graduation requirements.

• *Families are changing.* The family that includes two natural parents with mom at home is no longer traditional. Most at risk children live in one-parent homes, reconstituted or blended families, with relatives, or in a variety of other family situations. Many children come from homes in which the language spoken is not English. They have strong family customs and parents who probably have little familiarity with the dominant American value system and the U.S. public schools. Single parent homes, homes with working mothers, homes where conflict is high, all have special problems and needs. All families struggle with limited time and they need understandable and useful information about how they can help their children at home to become more successful in school. Unless we examine both family and school structures and practices, we will continue to receive contradictory, often false, messages about the capabilities of unconventional, minority, and hard to reach families.

• *Schools that are similar may differ in their parent involvement practices.* Parochial or private schools, preschools, bilingual schools, Chapter 1 schools, middle schools, and high schools vary in their parent involvement practices across and within categories. Schools of the same type serve different populations, have different histories of involving

parents, have teachers and administrators with different philosophies, training, and skills in dealing with parents. We have learned not to generalize about which schools have stronger or weaker programs; rather, each school's program must conform to its own needs.

• *Parent involvement requires site-specific development and leadership.* Programs must be tailored to the experiences and current practices of school leadership. Administrative and budgetary support for training teachers and parents must be available. Materials and equipment are needed, and the success of the program must be evaluated for effectiveness.

• *Family requests for involvement are constant.* Parents in all types of schools and at all grade levels have the need for clear communication about their children's attendance, behavior, academic progress, the curriculum, and how to help their children at home. The common requests from parents highlight the findings that teachers are the key advisors about how time spent at home on schoolwork, learning games, enrichment, or review can benefit the learning and development of children.

Parents As Partners In The Educational Process

The following provides a description of ways in which parents can serve as valuable resources in the education of their children.

1. *The Parent As Teacher*

All parents have "teaching skills," and community-based education programs have brought about a new awareness of the parents' teaching role and its effect on the learning process. These new community-oriented partnerships have begun redefining teaching as far more than didactic instruction. The new definition emphasizes the following dimensions of teaching: setting the stage for learning, modeling appropriate behavior, managing the environment, sharing information, and engaging in direct and natural interaction with the learner. From this description, immediate implications are drawn about the relationship between parents as teachers and their effect on children as learners. According to this definition, parents are functioning daily as teachers of their children. They may not formulate daily lesson plans or develop unit tests, but they do teach through a strategy that is not frequently replicated in the schools.

2. *The Parent As Decision-Maker*

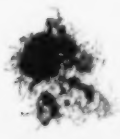
Every parent makes daily decisions that affect the welfare and growth of his/her children, and usually these decisions are based on what the parents think is best for the child. If a parent has this much influence on a child's development at home, then the parent should automatically have a role in shaping the child's school experience. Even though parents are not always prepared to make decisions about the school's program(s), they should have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the goals of the school. Once parents are informed about the functions of school, they can work cooperatively with administrators and teachers in helping shape the educational plan, assist in its implementation, and evaluate its effectiveness. This collaborative effort will not only bring about more positive results, but the educational needs of the learner will come closer to being met both at home and in the classroom. As partners in decision-making, parents and school personnel can achieve better educational plans and provide more relevant learning experiences for their children and students.

3. *The Parent As Community Representative*

In many cases school staffers differ from the student population in both cultural, linguistic, and economic background. On the other hand, parents are community members who know the social, economic, cultural, and political environment in which their children function. Particularly in the case of schools located in areas with high concentrations of minorities, it is an absolute necessity that parents provide the school with information about the community. No educational plan is workable unless it takes into account the needs of the community it serves, and the best source for identifying those needs are the parents. Schools can no longer afford to overlook the valuable community resources that parents can provide. If school personnel are going to survive and be successful, they must form partnerships with the parents and the communities in which they serve.

Establishing and Implementing Parent/School Partnership Strategies

Effective parent-school partnerships are a lynch-pin for bringing about systematic change in increasing student retention and achievement. In order to initiate such efforts, the school should consider the following strategies in planning the implementation of such projects.



1. *Parent Education*

As is the case with any person embarking on a new venture, parents need a period of orientation and adjustment before they can effectively participate in school activities. They must be exposed to what is happening in the school and the classroom. They must become acquainted with the new philosophies in education and understand the goals and objectives of a given program. Parents need to know the meaning of such things as individualized instruction, sheltered English, bilingual education, team teaching, the role of paraprofessionals in the classroom, the effects of peer and cross-age tutoring, the sequence of first and second language acquisition, etc. These are practices that most parents, even if they attended American schools, are not part of their school experience. It is the school's duty to inform parents of these concepts and to make them aware of their role in the total process. When parents understand these terms and concepts and can see how these provide better opportunities for their children, then they will be ready to begin to help the school.

2. *Giving Parents Follow-Up Assistance*

Many parents are hesitant to become involved in the school's programs because they feel inadequate in conducting school-related work. School staffs should take steps to remedy this feeling by making parents view the school as a safe, non-threatening place where they are needed and respected. In order to do this, school personnel should establish a sense of sensitivity, caring and consideration. This affective element will gain results from parents, and it should be the base for continued parent involvement. Parents will need on-going assistance in becoming an integral part of the school plan. An open-door policy, supported by frequent and appropriate school-home communication and parent recruitment, will enhance and expand the school's parent and community participation.

3. *Allowing Parents To Take The Initiative*

Parents can cause a threat to school personnel. A strong emphasis on parent and community involvement can cause some concerns among educators who do not fully understand the benefits of such an approach. However, most of these problems stem from no or mis-communication that can be resolved through the efforts of both parties. As stated earlier, parents can make many valuable contributions if they are provided with appropriate training and consideration. Likewise, parents still view the

school staff as the professionals and are willing to assist when they are given the opportunity. The question of allowing parents to take the initiative is as ambiguous and controversial as it is valid and beneficial. Parents, by nature, view the school as an institution that will provide their children with the skills they need for success. Schools look to parents for support and as the source of their existence. If these two entities are so interdependent, why then is it not logical to share the initiative on issues that are relevant to both?

4. *Allowing Parents To Make Recommendations*

Most schools are presently experiencing a transition in educational planning and programming. Because of past failures, many new approaches such as site-based decision-making are being pursued, particularly in areas with fast changing demographics. This period of experimentation calls for cooperation and collaboration among all concerned. The efforts of both camps have not totally united to reach the optimum potential. Even today, some parents blame the schools, and some schools blame the parents for student failures.

The efforts of school personnel would be greatly enhanced if parents were allowed to become more active in school planning. Parents who have been around their children during their entire life span can offer a perspective that is often missed by the educator who has only known the students for a few months. Parents who live in the community have an understanding that is often lost by the teacher who lives across town. Parents who have been raised in a particular culture tend to respond to it more effectively than a teacher who is not a member of the group. The importance of these implications on a school program should automatically require the parent to review the school's educational plans and to make recommendations for improved changes.

Perspectives For The Future

The concept of parent and community involvement is as old as the public school, but the new emphasis on active participation and collaborative decision-making has brought on a series of significant changes in public education. With the rise of greater educational opportunities for all and the ageless respect for education as a key to success, greater parent participation will contribute to a number of new directions in our public schools, both in urban and rural settings.

As parents and community members become more involved in school programs, they will also recognize a need for greater self-improvement. The Community School for all ages will become a reality in communities where parents were previously willing to accept their lack of education in favor of a better one for their children. Closer contact with the schools can motivate them to seek more formal or informal education for themselves, as they begin to see the school as a nurturing and safe place that can contribute to their and their children's well being and academic achievement.

Through the increased involvement of parents, school personnel will experience a greater degree of success among their student bodies. The parents' input will generate a more relevant educational plan that is based on real needs of the student population. The joint partnership between parents and educators will enhance school operations and service delivery. Greater support for the school and its programs will come about because of this wholesome interdependence between school and community. With a sincere and comprehensive effort on the part of the school - parents get excited; parent want to help; parents want to get involved; parents want the best for their children. The schools cannot afford to not tap this valuable resource and unleash its potential.

REFERENCES

Becher, R. (1984). "Parent Involvement: A Review of Research and Principles of Successful Practice." National Institute of Education, Washington, D.C.

Chavkin, N. and Williams, D. (Winter 1988). "Critical Issues in Teacher Training for Parent Involvement." *Educational Horizons* 66, 2: 87-89.

Cochran, M. and Henderson, C. (1986). "Family Matters: Evaluation of the Parent Involvement Program." Cornell University, Ithica. N.Y.

Gordon, I. (1978). "What Does Research Say About the Effects of Parent Involvement on Schooling?" Paper for Annual Meeting of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Henderson, A. (1987). *The Evidence Continues to Grow: Parent Involvement and Student Achievement*, National Committee for Citizens in Education, Columbia, MD.